Africa Command: Forecast for the Future

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Introduction

Rumors of a United States Africa Command that surfaced in January 2006 appeared to become reality in December. As Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld left his position, he presented to President Bush for approval a plan for a special geographic combatant command dedicated to Africa.[1] If approved, the establishment of United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) will mark a significant step in the recognition of Africa as strategically important by the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD). In addition, other branches of government would interact more closely as this headquarters would contain significant additional representation across all government agencies.

The creation of AFRICOM would change a U.S. policy that has relegated Africa to a lower level of importance in comparison to other world regions, changing a prioritization that has existed since at least the end of colonialism in Africa in the 1960s. For instance, until 1983 Sub-Saharan Africa was not included in any of the geographic combatant commands. Once it was finally included in the combatant command system, it simply became a much-ignored component of overstretched commands: United States European Command (USEUCOM) in the 1980s due to the Cold War and United States Central Command (USCENTCOM) in the 1990s and early 2000s due to heightened tensions in the Middle East.

Since 9/11, however, the DoD has recognized Africa as a key area for its counterterrorism operations, specifically against al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in various sub-regions within Africa. As a mark of this change, the DoD has stood up the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) and Operation Enduring Freedom-Trans-Sahara (OEF-TS) in 2002 and 2005, respectively. Africa is becoming increasingly important to U.S. national security as a result of terrorist threats, disease proliferation, and valuable energy sources.

AFRICOM promises to address these issues affecting Africa that weigh against U.S. strategic interests. There are however two questions to be answered. How important is Africa to U.S. strategic interests? What must the command look like in order to address the issues and at the same time guard against perceptions by African peoples of U.S. imperialism?

This article addresses these questions in three sections. First, it will review current literature that addresses many issues and perceptions that surround military organization and operations in

Africa. Second, it will discuss Africa's strategic import to U.S. national interests. And finally, it will discuss the issues surrounding the Africa Command's potential structure and location.

Current Issues

The United States Government (USG) interest in Africa has varied since the end of the Second World War. The two constants in the U.S. perspective were that Africa has always been considered less important to U.S. interests than other regions, and that Europe should take the lead in engaging the region. This approach has resulted in policies over the years that are inconsistent, temporary, reactive and crisis-driven.[2]

Recent policy documents and statements, in particular those released post 9/11, suggest that Africa requires more attention in U.S. foreign policy[3] because of its increasing importance for U.S. national and economic security, and because of the humanitarian crises that emanate from the continent. First, recent documents paint an "arc of instability" that stretches from the Western Hemisphere, through Africa and the Middle East and extending to Asia.[4] Within this arc of instability, African territory not only harbors terrorist organizations, but chronically unstable and war-torn territories encourage terrorist recruitment. Africa is therefore seen to hold the potential to support significant terrorist threats within its vast under-governed territories. Many African nations lack security and stability as evidenced by the persistent and ongoing conflicts in Western Africa, Sudan, Somalia, Chad.[5] Economically, Africa will provide up to 25 percent of the United States' oil imports by 2015 according to some estimates.[6] The humanitarian situation is also dire, requiring assistance programs from the U.S. and other governments and other actors. Many African nations suffer from significant diseases like HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. Africa contains many of the world's poorest and least developed countries.

To address these issues, the USG has adopted a more proactive approach in recent years. The Administration has created and in some cases continued several programs to implement the "new" policy focus on Africa. These programs include the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), Millennium Challenge Account (MCA), several counterterrorism (CT) programs, and the African Contingency Operation for Training and Assistance (ACOTA), the flagship program of the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI). As national policies and programs are set, a natural cascading effect occurs on departmental (i.e. DoD) strategic and operational guidance directly impacting lower level execution. As a result of focused attention on Africa, departmental implementation should have the proper focus and tools (i.e. forces and command and control) in order to achieve the overarching strategic goals.

These policy changes were only the beginning, however. In recent years (2000-2006), several mid-grade officers (O-4 to O-5 ranks) have made recommendations that support the establishment of a united combatant command (UCC) focused on Africa, tentatively called the United States African Command (AFRICOM).[7] Recommendations have ranged from creating a new, fully staffed unified command down to a subordinate Joint Task Force (JTF) Command (essentially a sub-unified command) underneath a current combatant command. Support for an AFRICOM has come from sources other than just military officers, to include policy analyst groups, administrators, and academics.[8] Similarly, these options typically recommend transferring total responsibility to either USEUCOM or USCENTCOM.

Debating the Logic for AFRICOM

Those who oppose establishing a combatant command in Africa are generally critics of U.S. policies, particularly in the area of military engagement. These critics of U.S. involvement in Africa fall into two categories. One the one hand are the academics and policy analysts critical of U.S. oil, terrorism, and humanitarian policies and military personnel who argue against the strategic

importance of Africa; and on the other are those who recommend a functional command structure based upon capabilities, similar to the United States Special Operations Command.

In the first category, critics of U.S. policy in Africa focus mainly on oil, terrorism, and a perceived Janus-faced policy. The first element and the most common criticism is that U.S. policy is driven by a strategic interest in oil. Several experts contend that a desire to control the flow of African oil is the main objective behind the new strategic interest in Africa.[9] They often link U.S. counterterrorism initiatives as the method in which to establish a U.S. military presence in the region and therefore a method to secure a means to ensure a steady flow of oil from Africa to the United States.[10] A small element within this group highlights a belief that the U.S. masks the strategic interest in oil behind the facade of humanitarian concerns such as the genocide in Darfur and support for HIV/AIDS relief.[11] They state that the U.S. promises a great deal on the humanitarian stage, but delivers little, while at the same time increasing the development of military engagement in the region and demonstrating imperialist tendencies.

A second element in the first category of critics focuses on U.S. efforts in the War on Terrorism and states that this involvement will only fuel the terrorism in which it is meant to stop and increase anti-American sentiment in Africa.[12] David Gutelius goes furthest, suggesting that some Muslim leaders liken the military involvement to a Christian Crusade.[13] Others are concerned that African governments will be tempted to manufacture terrorist threats in order to "create" a need for engagement, coerce legitimate opposition groups, and seek to gain the funds and training that come with the increased engagement.[14] Several authors have indicated that this current stream of engagement carries an eerily similar feel to U.S. Cold War policies and engagement, in response to which African governments made pragmatic alliances for monetary gains, without any real commitment to the cause.[15]

The second category of critics has two different arguments—first, the strategic importance of Africa and second, that the military command structure should focus on capabilities and not regions.[16] In 2002, Lieutenant Colonel John Campbell argued that Africa had not reached the level of strategic interest necessary to create a UCC for Africa and that doing so would overemphasize the military aspect of foreign policy.[17] In other words, creating such a command would support the perception that the U.S. has adopted an imperialist intent and seeks to control other nations.

The second argument in the second category of critics argues for the creation of a command, but not with a regional focus. Instead, any reorganization of the Unified Command Plan should focus on functional capabilities such as Humanitarian Assistance, Security and Stability, and Special Operations.[18] In addition, Kelly Houlgate argues for the DoD to take the lead to "force the inter-agency process to reform itself" leading to a sub-argument within this category over the role that the DoD should play in the organization of the U.S. government. Essentially, she argues that the DoD is required to push the rest of the U.S. government to action, a point that would most likely create a discord in the execution of U.S. policy.

In summary, two schools of thought exist between critics and supporters for establishing an Africa UCC; however, these two lines never quite intersect. Supporters argue that an Africa Command would enable better coordination between DoD elements, other USG Agencies, and other nations, facilitating better execution in a more effective and efficient manner regarding U.S. policies intended to engage and assist African nations. Critics argue that Africa has not reached the level that requires an increased military commitment, either in direct support of operations or in the form of a dedicated regional command. The adverse impacts they highlight would likely increase anti-American sentiment and an over emphatic military approach within the U.S. government would likely result. This leads to the question—does Africa hold the strategic importance to reorganize the military command structure at the risk of its adverse impacts?

Creating the Africa Command: Is the Strategic Importance Really There?

Historically, the DoD has been slow to reorganize in light of strategic requirements. Indeed, strategic interests and interpretations change over time which require changes to the DoD command structures to better manage, monitor, and align regions to increase effectiveness and efficiency.

Africa's Strategic Interest Across the Decades

Africa arguably has been considered of significant strategic interest for many years. These statements cross many lines: academic, prominent government officials, and policy analysis groups. Yet, U.S. foreign policy and in particular the DoD have yet to organize and develop a consistent, effective way in implementing the chosen policies. In comparison with South America and the Middle East, definite similarities arise with the given language for their developmental periods. The language is similar to that applied to the Middle East in the years before the establishment of USCENTCOM, although the level of interest is certainly less in Africa. The language has not changed significantly over time, except that policy was oriented away from military engagement during the 1990s. This seems insignificant given that there were at least twenty U.S. military operations in Africa between 1990 and 2000.[19] Since 2000 there have been ten military operations in Africa.[20]

In 1957, then-Vice President Richard Nixon argued that "[f]or too many years…Africa in the minds of many Americans has been regarded as a remote and mysterious continent which was the special province of big game hunters, explorers and motion picture makers."[21] Almost 30 years later, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger predicted that "U.S. interests in Africa will grow in the decade ahead,"[22] and one year later, Secretary of State Alexander Haig stated, "The United States must be prepared to use force, because escalating setbacks to our interests abroad, increasing lawlessness and terrorism, and the so-called wars of liberation are putting in jeopardy our ability to influence world events constructively and assure access to [resources]."[23] Africa has indeed held an interest at high levels of government as early as the 1950s. This interest would change in the 1990s as the focus of effort (aid and military assistance) shifted as the Cold War ended.

In the 1990s, the emphasis shifted to conflict prevention and management, and in so doing, arguments arose for a more direct engagement with the continent. The Office of International Security Affairs for the Department of Defense argued in a 1995 report that "the DoD priorities focus on conflict prevention, management and resolution."[24] Analysts argued that in this period, the Clinton Administration "articulated three broad policies for Africa that require substantial and direct involvement: enhancing security to promote peace and stability, promoting prosperity by integrating Africa into the world economy, and fostering democracy and respect for human rights."[25] Clinton himself argued that Africa was achieving a new level of importance, by stating that "[i]f any region of the world warrants the kind of 'shaping' now prescribed by U.S. strategic doctrine, surely that region is Africa."[26] The change in focus was affected by two major events in the early 1990s as well, the events surrounding Mogadishu Somalia in 1993-1994 and Rwanda in 1994 and resulted in less direct engagement than the comments indicate. This would change after 9/11.

Since 9/11 similar statements indicate increased attention to the Africa continent and a rise in its strategic importance. The African Oil Policy Initiative Group stated in 2002 that "intelligence estimates that African oil imports to the United States will rise to 25 percent [in the next ten years]."[27] In a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, J. Stephen Morrison highlighted that "Africa has assumed a new, strategic place in U.S. foreign policy and in the definition of vital U.S. national interests."[28] In 2006, Edmond Keller states that the threat of

international terror is "a blot on the landscape [and]… a strategic political challenge to human and national security of equal concern to Africa and the United States."[29]

There are examples from past reorganizations of the UCC structure that can shed light on the current proposal. In the case of USCENTCOM, the Middle East was recognized as strategically significant in and around World War II, well before it became part of the unified command structure. However, the DoD did not believe the Middle East warranted a dedicated command until it was directly threatened by a global power in the late 1970s that resulted in USCENTCOM's establishment in 1983. In this case, the strategic requirements had been established early, yet the DoD took decades to establish a command focused on the region and delayed applying the *means* that would enable the armed forces to effectively and efficiently execute military programs and operations.

The question then becomes: does Africa hold the strategic significance to create another military command? Does the policy require the command to have similar capabilities as other UCCs or can a smaller command under the auspices of a more senior command achieve the same objective?

So far, the evidence is mixed . The 2006 National Security Strategy (NSS) notes that Africa is of "growing geo-strategic importance and is a high priority."[30] Still, compared with other regions, it seems to remain near the bottom of the priority list. The NSS goes on to say that the Middle East has "command [of] the world's attention,"[31] Europe "remains a vital pillar of U.S. Foreign Policy,"[32] South and Central Asia hold "great strategic importance,"[33] and East Asia has "great opportunities and lingering tensions."[34] In terms of threats to U.S. strategic interests, the NSS highlights terrorism, regional conflicts, depressed economies in general and the impact of oil in/from unstable regions in particular, and AIDS and other debilitating diseases.[35] All of these occur in Africa. Calling Africa a *high priority* in comparison to statements like "command the world's attention" and "great strategic importance" suggests that Africa, while growing in strategic importance is still secondary to other regions.

This increased focus on Africa since 9/11 has resulted in an increase in military operations, and perhaps more significantly, civil-military operations coordinated amongst various U.S. executive departments such as the Department of State and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Specific U.S. military operations are covered in another section of this Strategic Insights issue.

Does Africa deserve its own unified command? Yes. The only determinant is the scale to which the command should be created. The strategic picture dictates that the DoD establishes U.S. Africa Command to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of military operations.

Current Developments

Could the War on Terror (WOT) be AFRICOM's trigger analogous to the Iranian Revolution and Soviet Invasion that urged the DoD to establish USCENTCOM? Admittedly, addressing the problems facing Africa that make its countries vulnerable to terrorism and insecurity requires more than a military solution, and any effort must be coordinated across U.S. government and other government agencies. Why, then, a military command and not an increased prioritization by other U.S. government agencies?

The reason is that the military has distinct advantages that would provide a unique opportunity to affect conditions on the ground in Africa. The military offers something that the other agencies lack: resources. The DoD has a comparative advantage in the U.S. government in its financial and logistical assets, that when coordinated provide significant benefit. Similar to the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF) that preceded USCENTCOM, these operations have

initiated much ground work to gain better insight into the region and increase engagement in Africa. In the majority of cases, interaction within the region meets with less resistance than that experienced by the RDJTF. Specifically with other agencies within the U.S. government, this is best evidenced in the fact that TSCTI and CJTF-HOA have significant interaction with agencies such as the Department of State or USAID.

Discussions concerning the creation of an Africa Command reached an apex in 2006. In January, Gordon Lubold wrote that the DoD was indeed considering an Africa Command and looked at expanding the tasking of CJTF-HOA to all of Africa and not just the countries in the Horn.[36] In August 2006, two news reports leaked information that the DoD was planning to establish an Africa Command.[37] The first report by Sally Donnelly was the more definite of the two, stating that the "Pentagon is expected to announce soon that it will create an entirely new military command to focus on the globe's most neglected region: Africa."[38]

Speculation about the creation of an Africa command remained optimistic until August, when a press release from Eric Edelman, Under Secretary of Defense (Policy) (USD[P]), clarified that AFRICOM was only a proposal and that the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) and the Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) were discussing the issue.[39]

The events surrounding this discussion over whether or not the DoD should establish AFRICOM are ambiguous. The Commanders of USEUCOM and USCENTCOM have supported engagement with Africa and ongoing operations in Africa as extremely important, but have remained quiet concerning direct support for the command which would likely unify efforts on the continent as well as establish unity of command.[40] The SECDEF indicated in late September 2006 that he and the CJCS supported AFRICOM, making these statements just two days before the "recall" by USD(P) Edelman, "Pete and I are for it and we've been pushing and pushing for six months and trying to get the system to come up with the details as to exactly how it would be done."[41] Finally, in December 2006, Secretary Rumsfeld as one of his final acts presented the President with a recommendation to establish AFRICOM.[42]

One point that has been highlighted in the press concerns the potential boundary between USCENTCOM and USEUCOM. The map that apparently was at the unveiling of the AFRICOM briefing this past September, showed that the "several countries in Eastern Africa would remain with Central Command."[43] Effectively what happens then is the countries formerly assigned to USPACOM join with the countries to which USEUCOM currently has responsibility and USCENTCOM retains responsibility for its current countries.

If these proposed borders hold, the new Africa command will be little more effective than the current COCOM arrangement. Retaining the boundary that separates the Horn of Africa from the rest of the continent defeats the main purpose of having an Africa command: a unified U.S. military and governmental policy towards the continent. Without removing the Eastern African countries from USCENTCOM and placing them under the same command as the rest of the continent, Africa will remain critically divided between two combatant commands, each of which have vastly different priorities. Therefore, from a policy perspective, a U.S.-Africa strategy and policy will still require more elements to coordinate under several commanders, i.e., its efficiency does not change. Sudan, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Kenya, and the Comoros have much more in common with their African neighbors than with the Middle East nations across the Red Sea. Their ties between West and East Africa are much stronger than the ties between East Africa and the Middle East, despite the strong Muslim influence in Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia. The Horn of Africa has numerous conflicts and ethnic groups that cross borders and therefore affect each country involved in any conflict.

If the DoD insists upon keeping the continent divided as it currently is, the commands that cover the region will require two sets of experts, both commanders and staffs that must be intimately familiar with all the issues pertaining to the border regions. For example, consider U.S. support to

African peacekeeping efforts. The African Union (AU) forces sent to Sudan (which falls within USCENTCOM) required USEUCOM assets to transport the peacekeepers from Nigeria and Rwanda. The reasons for this were twofold: USCENTCOM had more pressing priorities (Iraq and Afghanistan), and therefore fewer available assets to assist in the given mission, and Nigeria and Rwanda both fall within USEUCOM's AOR.

In the case of USCENTCOM, the importance of Eastern Africa was acknowledged at high levels of governance, yet the decision to create and/or modify the regions according to the best fit within the military command structure arrangements took decades. The risks and failures incurred could have been mitigated by establishing the command at an earlier time and fixing the boundaries so as to maximize efficiency and effectiveness around the principles of war unity of command and unity of effort. The DoD and the U.S. government cannot afford to let Africa Policy remain in the era of "band-aid" engagement. To effectively and efficiently develop its role, it must focus its efforts based off historical lessons that minimize risks that occur when unity of command and unity of effort are not optimally organized.

Unified vs. Sub-unified

Determining the size of AFRICOM is also an important question. In light of the NSS statements that put less emphasis on Africa's strategic import in comparison to other regions, the command should be sized according to the resources required and the missions it is expected to execute. In the near term, there are essentially two JTFs (CJTF-HOA and Operation Enduring Freedom, Trans-Sahara) focused on Africa, with three unified commands having African responsibilities. Only two unified commands have significant interests on the continent. These operations aim to achieve similar objectives—increased stability through engagement, training and assistance, and increased development with the assistance of other government agencies such as the USAID and the DoS. Because these operations have similar objectives and methods, DoD can gain significant efficiency and effectiveness by merging these commands under one unified command or sub-unified command.

The most effective way would be to merge Africa under one of the commands. USEUCOM makes sense on two accounts: it already holds a grand strategy which covers four of five regions in Africa and it is not encumbered by two regional conflicts that require significant resources.[44] This leads a partial agreement with the conclusion that comes in the briefings from September 2006 that support creating AFRICOM, however, it disagrees with the briefing which supports divides Africa along the current seam between USEUCOM and USCENTCOM. By leaving the boundary where it currently is, the benefits of creating AFRICOM—increased efficiency and effectiveness through a single Africa command—are minimized and the bureaucratic divides remain, potentially inhibiting the creation of a cohesive Africa policy. In order to maximize efficiencies and eliminate seams AFRICOM should gain responsibility for military concerns over the whole continent.

In addition, the proposed solution which seeks to establish AFRICOM as a sub-unified command makes sense. First, it will directly focus resources solely on the Africa continent and increase military expertise and thus eliminate internal competition with other command priorities (i.e. Iraq and Afghanistan operations). With AFRICOM, military matters at the combatant command level that affect the continent will become more cohesive by not dividing the operational commander's attention between politically and culturally different regions. This occurs in the case of USEUCOM between European and African matters and USCENTCOM with Middle East and African issues. It will also provide benefit to other agencies as a single point of contact for military affairs. By including the Department of State in its organizational structure as evidenced in the recent press releases, this appears to have been included in the design of the command allow for better coordination in policy development.[45] As the sub-unified command matures, it will become more readily viable should it become time to upgrade it to a unified command. In light of the

competition for resources this will require planning and forethought to enter into the budget process and receive full funding and authorities equal to other unified commands.

Basing Requirements

Three options present themselves over how and where to base a proposed AFRICOM: Africa, Europe, or the United States. The press report alludes to the importance of establishing a command on the continent and utilizing forward operating bases.[46] This discussion will also consider the timing of the transition, whether near-term (present to two years) or long-term (3 years and beyond). For the near term basing options are relatively straightforward—Europe or the United States. The United States allows for easy coordination amongst government agencies but is removed from the regional issues and has limited access. If located in Europe then the operational elements have much improved access as well as interaction with other nations that maintain significant interest on the African continent. This is important because the U.S. cannot provide assistance or achieve increased stability without the assistance of other nations that hold strategic interests in Africa. Therefore Stuttgart, Germany, home of USEUCOM becomes the most likely choice to host AFRICOM. USEUCOM has the infrastructure, command capabilities, and central location required of a developing command.

For the long-term, the three options open up. First, Africa: the AU has several headquarters throughout the continent which AFRICOM could align with and increase "in-country" coordination. The positives are an increase in accessibility; it promotes cultural understanding; and presents a forward deployed posture. The downsides are it will require a larger footprint due to force protection concerns; there are myriad choices that require consideration of political sensitivities; and it will prove costly as the existing infrastructure varies significantly from country to country.

The United States allows for reduced force protection considerations, developed infrastructure to support the command and collocates the command near the National Command Authority. A United States location significantly degrades the cultural interaction, decreases accessibility to partners, and signals to Africa that the U.S. does not consider this a serious effort.

A location in Europe takes the middle road in all of these. It does carry the benefit of closeness to other nations that have significant interests on the continent. From this location, better coordination of common interests would be possible and the planning for combined operations would come more easily. This does however reduce the cultural interaction with the African nations, which is a primary aim of establishing AFRICOM.

Conclusion

Establishing a United States Africa Command to support a region that has a demonstrated strategic interest follows the course of previous commands. In the case of USCENTCOM, the Middle East was strategically significant in its own right and deserving of a unified command. However, it took decades to establish the command. This was at a cost, not measured easily. In the case of USCENTCOM it came in the cost disjointed commands that contributed to the deaths of service members and lost equipment. Africa is currently a region in which no U.S. government agency has one division responsible for policy development or implementation. By establishing AFRICOM, the DoD can acknowledge Africa's strategic importance and unite the DoD Africa policy under one command.

Africa's three main elements that reinforce its strategic importance are its significant resources, vulnerabilities to terrorist elements, and forecast economic problems as a result of disease proliferation. The effect that an unstable Africa has on U.S. interests cannot be overlooked as it promises to increase in importance. By establishing AFRICOM, the DoD will better prepare itself to fulfill its role in protecting U.S. national interests on the continent.

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